

Lecture #6 – Song Leading Fundamentals

I. Introduction

In this lesson, we will explore the basics of leading a group of people in singing. We will focus primarily on leading congregation singing, but many of the techniques are applicable to leading choirs.

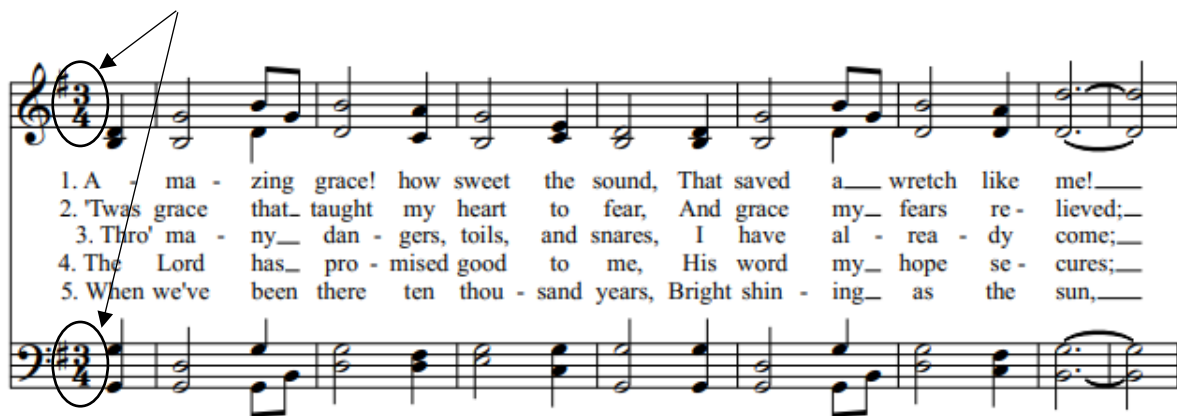
We will not cover song selection in this lesson but will focus on what to do when leading a song.

NOTE – the directions for hand movements are displayed for a right-handed person.

II. Determining Timing

To properly conduct a song, you must first know which pattern to use when leading it. This is done by examining the **time signature** in the music. It is composed of two numbers, one above the other. It is located on both the treble and bass clefs.

Amazing Grace! How Sweet the Sound



The image shows a musical score for the hymn "Amazing Grace! How Sweet the Sound". It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. Both staves have a time signature of 3/4, which is circled in red. The lyrics are written below the staves. The lyrics are:


1. A - ma - zing grace! how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me! —
2. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears re - lieved; —
3. Thro' ma - ny dan - gers, toils, and snares, I have al - rea - dy come; —
4. The Lord has pro - mised good to me, His word my hope se - cures; —
5. When we've been there ten thou - sand years, Bright shin - ing as the sun, —

The top number is the number of beats per measure. In **simple** time signatures, this will be a 2, 3, or 4. In **compound** time signatures, this will be a 6, 8, 9, or 12. There are also **irregular** time signatures that may have a 5 or 7, but there are practically unknown in the world of sacred music.


The bottom number is which note value represents one beat. A 2 represents a half note, a 4 represents a quarter note, and an 8 represents a sixteenth note. A shortcut to remember this is to think of it as a fraction. So, if the bottom number is a 2, think of $\frac{1}{2}$ and a half note. If the bottom number is a 4, think of $\frac{1}{4}$ and a quarter note. If the bottom number is an 8, think of $\frac{1}{8}$ and an eighth note.

In some cases, instead of numbers you may find a large C or a large cent sign:





This symbol is a shorthand way of writing , also known as **common time**.



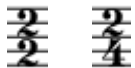
This symbol is a shorthand way of writing , also known as **cut time**.



In very rare cases, the time signature may change during the song. One example is “Christ Receiveth

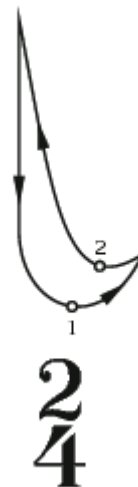
Sinful Men” where the verses are in  time but the chorus is in .

III. Conducting in Simple Time

Congregational music is usually written with very straightforward timing so that all singers can join in regardless of musical training or experience. You will find that many songs in the hymnal are written in simple time.

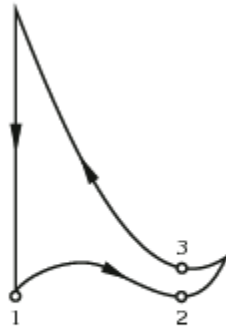


For  or  time, we only have two beats per measure. These are the simplest songs to lead. The **down beat** (or first beat of the measure) is signaled by dropping the hand down and the second beat by raising the hand up. There are two forms for this, but I would recommend the second as it simply looks better.





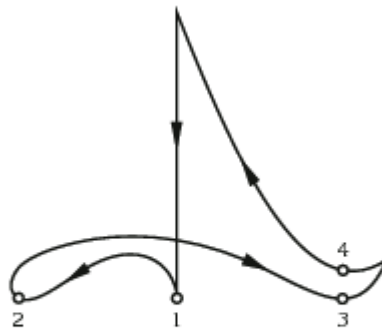
For $\frac{3}{4}$ time, we have three beats per measure. The down beat is signaled by dropping the hand down, the second beat by moving the hand outward, and the third beat by raising the hand up and inward.



$\frac{3}{4}$



For $\frac{4}{4}$ time, we have four beats per measure. The down beat is signaled by moving the hand down, the second beat by moving the hand inward, the third beat by moving the hand outward, and the fourth beat by raising the hand up and center.



$\frac{4}{4}$

I am convinced that if you can master these three patterns that you can be an effective song leader.

IV. Conducting in Compound Time

Compound time is when smaller note values (such as a sixteenth note) are combined to form one beat.

For example, let's look at the "Blessed Assurance" below. It is in $\frac{9}{8}$ time, so technically nine beats per measure with eighth notes being one beat. However, we can "simplify" the conducting pattern by examining the music.

Note in the first full measure we have two dotted quarter notes followed by three eighth notes. This is telling us that we can "combine" three eighth notes into one beat or movement in conducting.

Therefore, we can conduct this song using a $\frac{3}{4}$ pattern.


The image shows a musical score for the hymn "Blessed Assurance" in 9/8 time. The score consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a bass line (bass clef). The key signature has one sharp (F#). The vocal line begins with two dotted quarter notes followed by three eighth notes. Blue arrows are drawn above the first measure, indicating a simplified 3/4 conducting pattern: a down arrow for the first dotted quarter, an up arrow for the second dotted quarter, and a right arrow for the three eighth notes. This pattern is repeated for the subsequent measures. Below the musical notation, three verses of lyrics are provided:

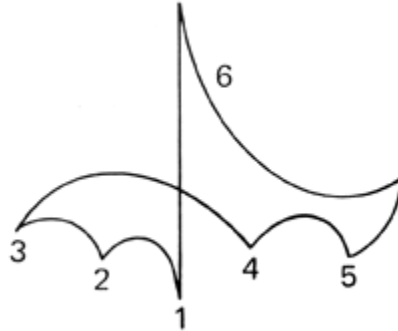
1. Bles - sed as - su - rance, Je - sus is mine! Oh, what a
 2. Per - fect sub - mis - sion, per - fect de - light, Vi - sions of
 3. Per - fect sub - mis - sion, all is at rest, I in my

Here is a quick "cheat sheet" that can help guide you to an easier pattern to use when you encounter compound time:

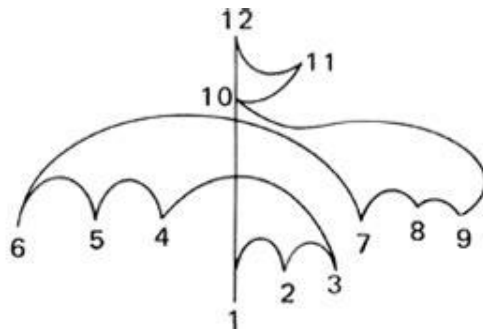
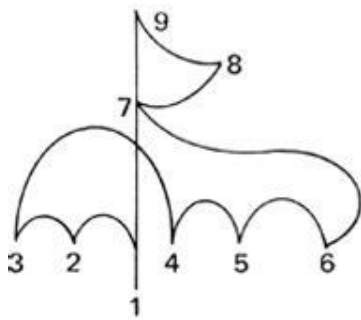
Compound Time	Simple Time Pattern
$\frac{6}{8}$ $\frac{6}{4}$	$\frac{3}{4}$
$\frac{6}{8}$ $\frac{9}{8}$	$\frac{3}{4}$
$\frac{12}{8}$	$\frac{4}{4}$



If you are adventurous, here is the timing for  time. There are some songs that are *very slow* in this time that you might want to try this conducting pattern with. However, I would recommend using one the of the simpler patterns if possible.



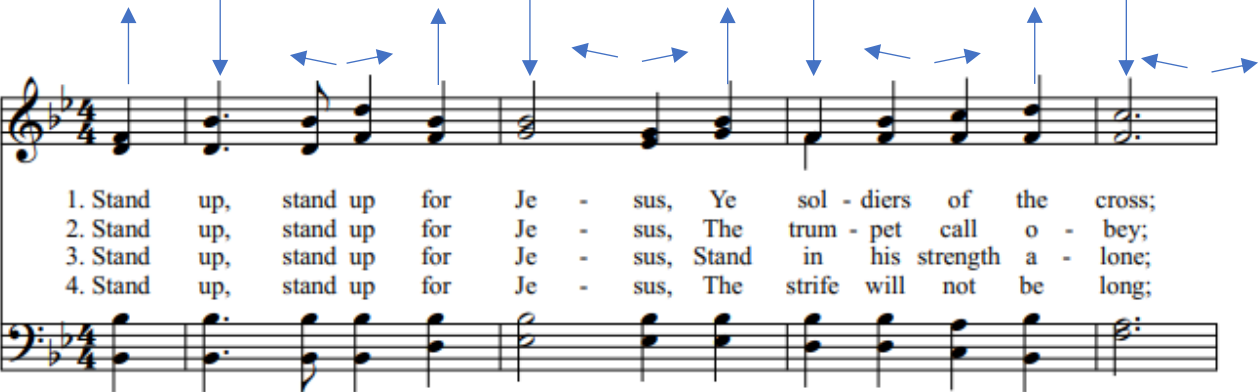
And here are the patterns for 9 and 12 beats per measure if you are insane enough to do them.



V. More About Hand Motions


The size of the pattern you make is typically proportional to the size of the group you are leading. There is little sense in using your entire arm length when leading an ensemble. The same goes for moving your hand a few inches or so when leading an auditorium with a thousand people in it. This can also be affected by the mood of the song.

Some songs do not begin on the first beat of a measure. They “borrow” a beat from the final measure of the song and place it at the beginning. Instead of beginning with a down beat or downward motion, you will instead begin with an upward motion. In the example of “Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus, it will look like:



The image shows a musical score for the hymn "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus" in 4/4 time. The score is written on two staves: a treble clef staff for the vocal line and a bass clef staff for the accompaniment. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The melody begins on the second beat of the first measure. Blue arrows above the treble staff indicate hand motions: an upward arrow on the first beat, a downward arrow on the second beat, and a series of alternating upward and downward arrows for the subsequent notes. The lyrics are provided below the treble staff.

1. Stand up, stand up for Je - sus, Ye sol - diers of the cross;
2. Stand up, stand up for Je - sus, The trum - pet call o - bey;
3. Stand up, stand up for Je - sus, Stand in his strength a - lone;
4. Stand up, stand up for Je - sus, The strife will not be long;

When holding out a note, such as when you come across  (a *fermata*, a.k.a. a “bird’s eye”), you indicate to hold the note by stopping the timing pattern and holding your hand upward and the side with the palm up.

To end a song or to cut off the held note of a *fermata*, you signal by making a “backwards C” motion with the hand, then moving outward with a closed hand (sort of like a pinching motion).¹

You can indicate the verse number by holding up the required number of fingers on your non-leading hand. Honestly, it is probably easier just to drop out a little early on the last note and say it.

VI. Announcing the Song

Always make sure that you give the congregation, choir, and accompanists time to pick up their hymn books, turn to the page, and a moment for them to see the song before you begin singing the first note.

¹ This is how I learned to do it, but I’ve also seen a small “slash” to “cut off” the last note. I’m not sure what the proper way is and most reference materials on conducting I have seen seem to leave this out.

Make sure and speak clearly and give the name and number multiple times. The rule of thumb is to announce the hymn number three times.

Announce the verse numbers that are going to be sung before beginning the song. Don't leave people guessing which ones to sing.

VII. Things to Know

Be able to determine the time signature of a song.

Be able to draw and conduct in the patterns for 2, 3, and 4 beats.

Be able to determine the “simple” pattern that can be used in compound time.

Announce the hymn number THREE TIMES.